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An examination of style in the children's
books of E. B. White

by

Marianne P. Ryan

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Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
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If you are engaged in writing a theme about my works, I think your best bet is to read them and say what you think of them.

E. B. White

CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

E. B. White's three books for children are considered modern classics. Stuart Little, published in 1945, and Charlotte's Web, completed in 1952, earned White the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award, given for a "substantial and lasting contribution to literature for children."¹ Following the 1970 publication of The Trumpet of the Swan, a contender for the Newberry Award that year, White received the Hans Christian Andersen Medal for Authors and went on to receive the National Medal for Literature in 1971. All three books have been recorded, widely translated, coded into Braille, and produced in educational media sets. In addition, Stuart Little was made into a movie for the NBC Children's Theatre in 1966; an animated film of Charlotte's Web was released in 1973; The Trumpet of the Swan, adapted to music for a children's concert, was performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1972 and has since been performed throughout the world.

The success of these children's books is understandable. White's competence both as a writer and as an authority on language and usage is, after all, unchallenged, and further, writing for children is important to him. His first published writings were children's stories that appeared in St. Nicholas Magazine; "A Winter Walk," 1911, and "A True Dog Story," 1914, earned White a silver and a gold badge, respec-

tively, the two highest honors given by the St. Nicholas League. He maintains that he has "not felt the need of any prize since then."²

Throughout the years that his wife, Katharine, reviewed juvenile books, White tried to stay on top of what was being published in the field. He lamented, in a 1938 essay on the subject, that much of it was "dull, prosy stuff"; in a later piece he rejected the "studied simplicity that often infects writing for children," with its condescension, patronage, guile, and cuteness.³ He offered this observation:

Anybody who shifts his gears when he writes for children is likely to end up stripping his gears. . . . Anyone who writes down to children is simply wasting his time. You have to write up, not down. Children are demanding. They are the most attentive, curious, eager, observant, sensitive, quick, and generally congenial readers on earth.⁴

Implicit in White's own juvenile books are his firm beliefs about writing for children--that it is "important work," that it requires respect for children as readers, that it provide "inspiration and guidance and challenge."⁵ Of all his publications, the children's books are his longest individual works; he devoted more time to writing and revising them than any others, attempting to fulfill the responsi-

bility he felt toward his audience. E. B. White has written nineteen books of prose and poetry; of them, his children's stories are the three bestsellers. Indeed, it is not surprising that Edward C. Sampson, White's sole biographer, has remarked that "it may well be that he will be longest remembered for these stories."⁶

What is surprising, however, is that in terms of critical study, White's children's books have been largely overlooked, their significance underrated. Brief book reviews are the primary source of information on White's three juvenile books, but most of these seem cursory commentaries that fall far short of giving the books adequate or accurate consideration. Some say little more than that the books are fanciful and charming; even Eudora Welty's article in the New York Times Book Review ends on the note that "Charlotte's Web is an adorable book."⁷ Many merely attempt to summarize plots or to find allegorical meanings where White himself says that none exist. A few others, most notably those by Bennett Cerf and Pamela Travers, author of Mary Poppins, probe slightly further, yet they explore only peripherally the general themes of loyalty and friendship which White himself states are not the books' main concerns. He explains that the stories are straightforward attempts to look at life--that Stuart Little deals with the quest for the elusive, that Charlotte's Web

celebrates life and the seasons, that The Trumpet of the Swan is a love story.⁸

Among the reviews, however, a handful hint that style is perhaps an aspect of the stories worth considering. Malcolm Cowley, in his discussion of Stuart Little, notes that "within his own range of effects, Mr. White has the best style of any American author;" according to the Times Literary Supplement, "the fallacy that anything will do for children" falls before the fresh and exciting language in Charlotte's Web; in the New York Times Book Review, John Updike comments that White's "straight and earnest telling" and "love of natural detail lifts the prose into felicity" in The Trumpet of the Swan.⁹ These are points well taken, yet none of the three articles goes on to explore the subject further.

This matter of style in White's children's books warrants examination; yet, because the term style is itself ambiguous, it is difficult to determine what to include in such a study. If style amounts to the way grammatical units are together used by a writer, the criteria for discussion are clear. In his dissertation Prose Styles in the Essays of E. B. White, J. W. Fuller lists numerous technical traits of White's writing, among them sentence types, use of internal punctuation, and paragraph length. "But," Sampson contends,

"these are the tools, the means and not the end." He goes on to make the important distinction: "The grammarian or rhetorician recognizes White's skill; the general reader understands what White is saying."¹⁰

E. B. White states that indeed it is this broader sense of style, the way words sound on paper, that is "distinguished and distinguishing" in the writer's work, and he maintains that this "results more from what a person is than from what he knows." He believes that "The approach to style is by way of plainness, simplicity, orderliness, sincerity." These qualities, White feels, take on special significance when writing for children because "The use of language begins with imitation. The infant imitates the sounds made by its parents; the child imitates first the spoken language, then the stuff of books." Through his language and style, then, White strives to set a sound example for children who read his books.¹¹

This thesis will examine style in the children's books of E. B. White. Its purpose is threefold: to determine the key aspects of style--that is, what is distinguished and distinguishing--in White's three books for children based on a study of those texts, the remainder of White's corpus, and additional related sources; to illustrate and compare examples of the stylistic elements within and among the stories;

to discuss the significance of White's books for children relative to those aspects of style considered. Previously, no such study has been made.

NOTES

¹Henry Raymont, "Children's Books Reward Authors," New York Times, 23 Jan. 1970, p. 45.

²"To Alexander B. Toth," 29 Nov. 1961, Letters of E. B. White, ed. Dorothy Lobrano Guth (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 488.

³E. B. White, "Children's Books," in One Man's Meat (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), p. 25; E. B. White, "Laura Ingalls Wilder Award Acceptance Speech," Horn Book, 46 (1970) 349.

⁴George A. Plimpton and Frank H. Crowther, "The Art of the Essay, I. E. B. White," Paris Review, 48 (Fall, 1969), 84. Part of this article is based on a conversation between White and the authors.

⁵White, "Children's Books," p. 22; Robert Van Gelder, "E. B. White," in Writers and Writing (New York: Scribners, 1946), p. 308; White in Plimpton and Crowther, 86.

⁶Edward C. Sampson, E. B. White, Twayne United States Authors Series, No. 232 (New York: Twayne, 1974), p. 104.

⁷All reviews of E. B. White's children's books consulted for this study are listed separately in the final section of the bibliography; Eudora Welty, "Life in the Barn Was Very Good," New York Times Book Review, 19 Oct. 1952, p. 49.

⁸Bennett Cerf, "Trade Winds," Saturday Review, 15 Nov. 1952, pp. 6-8; P. L. Travers, "Tangible Magic," New York Herald Tribune Book Review, 16 Nov. 1952, pp. 1, 38; "To Childhood Revisited Class," 9 Mar. 1973, Letters, p. 645.

⁹Malcolm Cowley, "Stuart Little: Or New York Through the Eyes of a Mouse," New York Times Book Review, 28 Oct. 1945, p. 7; Rev. of Charlotte's Web, by E. B. White, Times Literary Supplement, 28 Nov. 1952, p. 7; John Updike, "For Louis, Childhood Was the Trumpet of the Swan," New York Times Book Review, 28 June 1970, p. 4.

¹⁰J. W. Fuller, Prose Styles in the Essays of E. B. White, Diss. Washington 1959 (Seattle: Univ. of Washington, 1959), pp. 91, 103, 180; Sampson, p. 158.

¹¹William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White, The Elements of Style, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 59, 62-63.

CHAPTER II. DESCRIPTION

Description is the most distinguishing feature of the prose in E. B. White's children's stories. Through description, White integrates what he considers essential in writing for children, transmitting honest and accurate information through simple language and overwhelming detail.¹

Despite the elements of fantasy in White's three juvenile books, the stories are fundamentally true to life.

White maintains:

I have two or three strong beliefs about the business of writing for children. I feel I must never kid them about anything; I feel I must be on solid ground myself. I also feel a writer has an obligation to transmit, as best he can, his love of life, his appreciation for the world. I am not averse to departing from reality, but I am against departing from the truth.²

Given his particular point of view, then, White describes life honestly in each of the books--the comforts and inadequacies of city life in Stuart Little, the simple pleasures and struggles for survival of life on the farm in Charlotte's Web, the beauty and danger of life in the wilderness in The Trumpet of the Swan. In each book, too, White in some way describes either death or monstrosity--what he was warned are the "two taboos" in writing for children and what he was advised to eliminate from the stories. However,

White retained the mouse child, the dying heroine, and the defective trumpeter in his books, believing that children "accept, almost without question, anything you present them with, as long as it is presented honestly, fearlessly, and clearly," and that they must be exposed to more than "life neatly packaged."³

White strives to make the descriptions in his children's stories as accurate as possible. Charlotte's Web was written while White was residing year round on his Maine farm, which serves as the backdrop of the story. The characters in the book are based on animals that he raised himself and knew well; according to White, Charlotte is the fictional counterpart of a common grey spider he observed in his barn, and Wilbur is named after his own spring pig. In addition, the Arables and the Zuckermans are White's neighbors, and the fair where Wilbur triumphs is a representation of the Blue Hill Fair in Maine.⁴

Although White based much of this story on such ready information, he researched spiders for a year before beginning to write.⁵ Hence, when Charlotte tells Wilbur how she traps insects in her web, ties them with silk, and drinks their blood, all is accurate. White states:

Charlotte's Web is, of course, a web of fantasy but the web itself is structurally accurate and so is *Aranea Cavatica*;

and although the book is not a natural history book, it is faithful in its fashion to nature and to man.⁶

In The Trumpet of the Swan, the descriptions of the trumpeters, their nesting and migratory habits, and their sounds and behaviors are all accurate. White is knowledgeable about birds; in his essays he refers to his study of Edward Howe Forbush's Birds of Massachusetts and Other New England States, his observation of pigeons in New York City, and his delight in watching birds along the Maine coast.⁷ White studied trumpeter swans for nearly ten years before beginning the book; he asserts that "however fantastical the tale, the behavior of the birds is authentic and violates nothing in the natural world of swans."⁸

The story's settings are all authentic; White describes Montana's Red Rock Lake area, Boston, Camp Kookooskoos--based on his own Camp Otter in Ontario, and Philadelphia. He researched the Philadelphia Zoo and its Bird Lake while working on the book so that his accounts of those surroundings would be as up to date and accurate as possible.⁹

Stuart Little is authentic in a way different from the other two books. The idea for Stuart came to White in a dream he had aboard a rail coach returning him to New York from Virginia. When he awoke, he made extensive notes on the charming fellow who had appeared to him, who "had the

features of a mouse, was nicely dressed, courageous, questing," and Katharine White noted that although nearly twenty years passed before Stuart Little was published, White deviated little from his notes, in an attempt to accurately reconstruct his dream in story form. White set the story in the New York City area where he grew up; he did no additional research for the book.¹⁰

The true and accurate information that is the substance of White's stories for children is transmitted through his simple, detailed language; White plainly describes the characters, scenes, and happenings in the books. He relies mostly on nouns and verbs for his effects, believing that some adjectives and most qualifiers are "leeches that infect the pond of prose, sucking the blood of words."¹¹ His images are never cluttered; rather they are clean and clear. Using the simplest of nouns and verbs, White describes Stuart in the garbage truck with "egg on his trousers, butter on his cap, gravy on his shirt, orange pulp in his ear, and banana peel wrapped around his waist."¹² At the Boston Ritz, Louis's more pleasant experience with food began when the waiter "rolled the table into the room, placed a huge platter of watercress sandwiches on it along with a plate, a knife, a fork, a spoon, salt and pepper, a glass of water, and a linen napkin, nicely folded."¹³ Again,

nouns and verbs are used.

To describe action, White often uses short, simple sentences. When used in succession, such sentences provide a particularly good picture of fast happenings, as of those following Wilbur's escape from the barnyard:

The cocker spaniel sprang for Wilbur's hind legs. Wilbur jumped and ran. Lurvy reached out and grabbed. Mrs. Zuckerman screamed at Lurvy. The goose cheered for Wilbur. Wilbur dodged between Lurvy's legs. Lurvy missed Wilbur and grabbed the spaniel instead.¹⁴

In his descriptions, White often uses repetition; he does so in a variety of patterns. Sometimes he emphasizes the final element of short sentences as in the description of the interior of Stuart's sabotaged canoe: "The ballast rocks were gone. The pillow was gone. The back rest was gone" (SL, pp. 120-121). At other times, he repeats a word several times within one sentence. In the description of the traits Templeton lacked, the result is quite emphatic:

The rat had no morals, no conscience, no scruples, no consideration, no decency, no milk of rodent kindness, no compunctions, no higher feeling, no friendliness, no anything. (CW, p. 46)

Believing that "children like to hear the sounds words make," White often repeats simple sounds in his descriptions.¹⁵ Sometimes the sounds are highly alliterative, as when White describes the first signs of summer: "The sun

shone down, strong and steady" (TS, p. 202). At other times the sound pattern is less obvious, but nonetheless effective, as in the description of steady rain:

The next day was rainy and dark. Rain fell on the roof of the barn and dripped steadily from the eaves. Rain fell in the barnyard and ran in crooked courses down into the lane where thistles and pigweed grew. Rain spattered against Mrs. Zuckerman's kitchen windows and came gushing out of the downspouts. Rain fell on the backs of the sheep as they grazed in the meadow. (CW, p. 25)

Occasionally White uses contrast to focus attention on a part of the whole that he is describing. With statements containing simple nouns and verbs, White contrasts Charlotte's death and the end of the fair which occur simultaneously. Amid the bustling activity that accompanies the closing of the fair, the life of the unnoticed spider ends in solitude:

She never moved again. Next day, as the Ferris wheel was being taken apart and the race horses were being loaded into vans and the entertainers were packing up their belongings and driving away in their trailers, Charlotte died. (CW, p. 171)

While the language of White's descriptions is simple, it is nonetheless specific. Admitting that he "hates all kinds of fuzziness,"¹⁶ White attempts to make his descriptions as precisely detailed as possible. Nothing is too insignificant to be mentioned: Sam Beaver tells the head-

man at the zoo that Louis's money bag holds exactly "four thousand six hundred and ninety-one dollars and sixty-five cents" (TS, p. 177); Charlotte is "about the size of a gum-drop" (CW, p. 37); in Harriet Ames's hair "was a stamen from a flower" (SL, p. 106).

In his books for children, White frequently uses extensive lists as descriptive devices. Taking care to include numerous particulars in these lists, he catalogues items ranging from the school supplies Stuart found on Miss Gunderson's desk--"an inkwell, a pointer, some pens and pencils, a bottle of ink, some chalk, a bell, two hairpins, and three or four books in a pile" (SL, p. 87)--to the instruments the cob saw in the Billings music store, among them "banjos, horns, violins, mandolins, cymbals, saxophones, marimbaphones, cellos" (TS, p. 77). Wilbur's breakfast--what another author might call "slops"--consists of "skim milk, crusts, middlings, bits of doughnuts, wheat cakes with drops of maple syrup sticking to them, potato skins, left over custard pudding with raisins and bits of shredded wheat" (CW, p. 25). However, it is paltry fare compared to the "rat's paradise" the sheep assures Templeton he'll discover at the fair:

In the horse barn you will find oats that
the trotters and pacers have spilled. In
the trampled grass of the infield you will

find old discarded lunch boxes containing the foul remains of peanut butter sandwiches, hard-boiled eggs, cracker crumbs, bits of doughnuts, and particles of cheese. In the hard packed dirt of the midway, after the glaring lights are out and the people have gone home to bed, you will find a veritable treasure of popcorn fragments, frozen custard dribblings, candies abandoned by tired children, sugar fluff crystals, salted almonds, popsicles, partially gnawed ice cream cones, and the wooden sticks of lollypops. (CW, p. 123)

Though all of White's descriptions are detailed and clear, his most striking ones are of simple scenes in nature. Using language that is simple and specific, White depicts the world he loves dearly. In writing these descriptions, White says, "I simply put down on paper the things I see"; on reading these descriptions, his friend James Thurber comments "the things he writes seem to me as lovely as a tree--say a maple after the first frost or a cherry hung with snow."¹⁷

In four simple sentences, White details the first scene of a new day:

The next day was foggy. Everything on the farm was dripping wet. The grass looked like a magic carpet. The asparagus patch looked like a silver forest. (CW, p. 77)

He explains the seasonal change from winter to spring:

But one day a change came over the woods and the pond. Warm air, soft and kind, blew through the trees. The ice,

which had softened during the night, began to melt. Patches of open water appeared. All the creatures that lived in the pond and in the woods were glad to feel the warmth. They heard and felt the breath of spring, and they stirred with new life and hope. (TS, p. 7)

He describes Ames Crossing, making it easy to see why Stuart almost settled there:

In the loveliest town of all, where the houses were white and high and the elm trees were green and higher than the houses, where the front yards were wide and pleasant and the back yards were bushy and worth finding out about, where the streets sloped down to the stream and the stream flowed quietly under the bridge, where the lawns ended in orchards and the orchards ended in fields and the fields ended in pastures and the pastures climbed the hills and disappeared over the top toward the wonderful wide sky, in this loveliest of all towns Stuart stopped to get a drink of sarsaparilla. (SL, p. 100)

The above examples of White's descriptive style illustrate his self-made demand that his children's stories be honest and accurate reflections of life. His descriptive style, which utilizes simple language and overwhelming detail, complements the authenticity and accuracy of his prose. Through description, White integrates meaning with method and thus effectively communicates the simple goodness and diversity of life.

NOTES

¹E. B. White, "Laura Ingalls Wilder Award Acceptance Speech," Horn Book, 46 (1970), 349.

²White, "Wilder Award Acceptance Speech," 350.

³George A. Plimpton and Frank H. Crowther, "The Art of the Essay, I. E. B. White," Paris Review, 48 (Fall, 1969), 84. Part of this article is based on a conversation between White and the authors; "To Mrs. Dorothy W. Sanborn," 18 Apr. 1961, Letters of E. B. White, ed. Dorothy Lobrano Guth (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 478.

⁴"To Mrs. N. J. Shopland," 28 Sept. 1961, Letters, p. 485.

⁵"To Gene Deitch," 12 Jan. 1971, Letters, p. 614.

⁶White, "Wilder Award Acceptance Speech," 351.

⁷E. B. White, "Mr. Forbush's Friends," in Essays of E. B. White (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), pp. 262-268; "The Rock Dove," in The Points of My Compass (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), pp. 125-133.

⁸"To Howard Cushman," 10 Oct. 1968, Letters, pp. 567-568; White, "Wilder Award Acceptance Speech," 351.

⁹"To Howard Cushman," 27 Oct. 1968, Letters, p. 570.

¹⁰E. B. White, "The Librarian Said It Was Bad for Children," New York Times, 6 Mar. 1966, p. 19; Katharine S. White as quoted in Letters, ed. Dorothy Lobrano Guth, p. 267; "To Childhood Revisited Class," 9 Mar. 1973, Letters, pp. 643-644.

¹¹William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White, The Elements of Style, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 65.

¹²E. B. White, Stuart Little (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945), p. 59; hereafter cited as SL. All further references to this work appear in the text.

¹³E. B. White, The Trumpet of the Swan (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 132; hereafter cited as TS. All further references to this work appear in the text.

¹⁴E. B. White, Charlotte's Web (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), pp. 20-21; hereafter cited as CW. All further references to this work appear in the text.

¹⁵"To J. G. Gude," 28 Aug. 1970, Letters, p. 604.

¹⁶White, "The Shape of Television," in Compass, p. 247.

¹⁷"To Mrs. N. J. Shopland," 28 Sept. 1961, Letters, p. 485; James Thurber, "E. B. W.," Saturday Review of Literature, 15 Oct. 1938, p. 9.

CHAPTER III. DICTION

Diction--the spoken and written words of the characters--is an important aspect of style in E. B. White's stories for children. Just as particular descriptions lend an essential quality to his writing, the words of the characters, human and animal, from the most central to the least important, distinguish his prose. White is perhaps more particular about assigning words to each of his characters than he is about any other aspect of his writing. He believes that diction, rather than description, should disclose who and what a character is, and he feels that this is best accomplished by tailoring speech to each character's manner and condition in life.¹

White is particular about language because he possesses a highly trained ear, able to distinguish among the slightest variances in speech. No doubt this is at least in part attributable to years of listening, which he admits to proudly. He was first exposed to differences in language as a child, on yearly summer travels between New York and Maine. Later, while enrolled at Cornell, White noticed that the language of the students was characterized by sloppy speech and poor vocabulary; he lamented this in "The King's English," an editorial awarded highest recognition by the Association of Eastern College Newspapers.²

After he made the decision to pursue a career in writing, White traveled across country, interested in "seeing and listening to all sorts of people."³ When he reached the west coast, he secured a position with the Seattle Times. This was his first job as a writer, and it taught him what he considers his most important lesson about language. Thurber recounts:

In Seattle (he) got a job as a reporter for the Times. Accurately reporting, one day, the anguished cry of a poor husband who had found the body of his wife in the municipal morgue, White wrote "My God, it's her!" and when the city editor changed this to "My God, it's she!" (he) moved sadly on to where they had a better understanding of people and a proper feeling for the finer usages of the English tongue.⁴

White's "feeling for finer usages" translates simply: "I report speech as I hear it, not as it appears in the books of rhetoric."⁵

Fuller notes in his study of style in White's essays that the words the characters speak sound authentic no matter who speaks them--nurses, cab drivers, waiters, or junk shop proprietors.⁶ This authentic quality of diction is perhaps even more evident in the words of the characters in White's children's books, who speak in a variety of tongues, each real and each revealing their subtly different personalities and conditions in life. As Thurber notes, White's

ear "not only notes the louder cosmic rhythms but catches the faintest ticking sounds."⁷

The books' country characters speak with the simple, informal tone that White finds agreeable because "it usually has an unmistakable sincerity which gives it distinction."⁸ Wholesome simplicity marks this exchange between Zuckerman and Lurvy:

"You know," (Zuckerman) said, in an important voice, "I've thought all along that that pig of ours was an extra good one. He's a solid pig. That pig is as solid as they come. You notice how solid he is around the shoulders, Lurvy?"

"Sure. Sure I do," said Lurvy. "I've always noticed that pig. He's quite a pig."

"He's long, and he's smooth," Zuckerman said.

"That's right," agreed Lurvy. "He's as smooth as they come. He's some pig."
(CW, pp. 81-82)

White also feels that "Country talk is alive and accurate, and contains more pictures and images than city talk."⁹

The telephone repairman, whose words reflect this quality of country speech, tells Stuart what he has seen while mending broken lines:

Swamps where cedars grow and turtles wait
on logs but not for anything in particular;
fields bordered by crooked fences
broken by years of standing still; orchards
so old they have forgotten where

the farmhouse is. . . pastures rank
 with ferns and junipers, all under
 fair skies with a wind blowing. . .
 spruce woods on winter nights where
 the snow lay deep and soft, a perfect
 place for a carnival of rabbits.
 (SL, pp. 129-131)

In each of White's books for children at least one character is a highly articulate speaker; in The Trumpet of the Swan, it is the loquacious cob. His diction mirrors his belief that he is one of the "noblest of all waterfowl" (TS, p. 74). Many of his utterances are exceedingly poetic:

"Here I glide, swanlike," he said,
 "while earth is bathed in wonder and
 beauty. Now, slowly, the light of day
 comes into our sky. A mist hangs low
 over the pond. The mist rises slowly,
 like steam from a kettle, while I glide,
 swanlike, while eggs hatch, while young
 swans come into existence. I glide and
 glide. The light strengthens. The air
 becomes warmer. Gradually, the mist
 disappears. I glide, I glide, swanlike.
 Birds sing their early song. Frogs that
 croak in the night stop croaking and are
 silent. Still I glide, ceaselessly,
 like a swan." (TS, p. 26)

White believes, however, that using overblown rhetoric is perhaps as bad as not being able to express oneself at all. This may be why he always offsets the cob's remarks with words from the practical, direct swan:

"Of course you glide like a swan," said
 his wife. "How else could you glide?
 You couldn't glide like a moose, could
 you?" (TS, p. 26)

Charlotte, a most articulate speaker and the self-proclaimed chairperson of the barnyard, often makes important announcements, as on the day the goslings were born:

"I am sure," she said, "that every one of us here will be gratified to learn that after four weeks of unremitting effort and patience on the part of our friend the goose, she now has something to show for it. The goslings have arrived. May I offer my sincere congratulations!"
(CW, p. 44)

Charlotte's diction is exact and precise even when she talks to herself. As she constructs her "terrific" web, she mentions every detail that is involved in the writing of one letter:

"Now for the R! Up we go! Attach! Descend! Pay out line! Whoa! Attach! Up you go! Repeat! Attach! Descend! Pay out line! Whoa, girl! Steady now! Attach! Climb! Attach! Over to the right! Pay out line! Attach! Now right and down and swing that loop and around and around! Now into the left! Attach! Climb! Repeat! O.K.! Easy, keep those lines together! Now, then, out and down for the leg of the R! Pay out line! Whoa! Attach! Ascend! Repeat! Good girl!" (CW, p. 94)

Stuart Little is perhaps the most skilled speaker of all White's characters. His command of language is unquestionable; it is marked by an extraordinary versatility that reflects his ability to adapt to any situation. Stuart adjusts his diction to fit every conversation he has. Fully

comfortable with sailing jargon, he tells Dr. Carey, "I'll catch the sloop broad on, and rake her with fire from my forward gun" (SL, p. 34); he remarks to the Ames Crossing storekeeper, "I've got a ruinous thirst" (SL, p. 102). With the children in Number Seven School, Stuart is authoritative, commanding "Everyone will now take his or her seat" (SL, p. 89), and colloquial, responding "What's the diff?" to the comment of a student (SL, p. 92). He is able to bargain with the reluctant gas station owner: "You need money and I need the gas. Why can't we work something out" (SL, p. 125), and to recite lines remembered from a movie to the sleeping Margalo: "Sleep dwell upon thine eyes, peace in thy breast" (SL, p. 54).

Stuart's penchant for language is also distinguished by the interest he shows in the diction of others. Although suffering in bed with bronchitis, he is intrigued by Margalo's introduction of herself:

"I come from fields once tall with
wheat, from pastures deep in fern and
thistle; I come from vales of meadow-
sweet, and I love to whistle."

Stuart sat bolt upright in bed.
"Say that again!" he said. (SL, p.
51)

Similarly, at Dr. Carey's office, Stuart gives his full attention to the patient with gauze-packed mouth who tries to help him in his search for Margalo:

"If 'oo 'on't 'ocate a 'ird in 'entral 'ark, 'ake a 'ew 'ork 'ew 'aven & 'artford 'ailway 'n 'ook in 'onnecticut."

"What?" cried Stuart, delighted at this new kind of talk. "What say, Mr. Clydesdale?"

"He says if you can't locate a bird in Central Park, take a New York New Haven & Hartford Railway train and look in Connecticut," said Dr. Carey. (SL, p. 77)

Stuart's conversation with Clydesdale is significant in that it is a rare example of White's use of dialect. Despite the fact that he was "told by an authority on juvenile literature that dialect is tops with children," White believes that the use of tricky or quaint spelling can confuse the reader. He notes in The Elements of Style that the best dialect writers use their talents economically, and he cautions that when reproducing dialects it is essential to be consistent and to spell ingeniously to capture unusual inflections.¹⁰

White follows his own advice. Carefully maintaining consistent spelling, he creates specialized dialects only a few other times in the children's stories, once for Templeton who complains as he transports Charlotte's egg sac, "Thith thtuff thticks in my mouth. It'th worth than carmel candy" (CW, p. 170), and again for the fast talking goose who suggests that the way to spell "terrific" is "tee dou-

ble ee double rr double rr double eye double ff double eye
double see see see see see" (TS, p. 89).

Among the children in the books there are clear differences in diction. No two of them speak the same way; their words are tailored to who and what they are. Stuart's wholesome country school students banter with him suggesting simple rules for governing the world, including "No scrap-ping" and "Absolutely no being mean" (SL, p. 94). Responding to Stuart's query about what is important in life, one boy in the class answers sincerely: "A shaft of sunlight at the end of a dark afternoon, a note in music, and the way the back of a baby's neck feels if its mother keeps it tidy" (SL, p. 92). By contrast, Leroy, the "fat sulky boy of twelve" Stuart encounters at the sailboat pond in Central Park, speaks like a spoiled child:

"Come back here!" he called to Stuart.
"Come back here and get on my boat. I
want you to steer my boat. I will pay
you five dollars a week and you can
have every Thursday afternoon off and a
radio in your room." (SL, p. 37)

On the other hand, Sam Beaver's diction reveals a much more mature child: he tells his father that Louis is "defective" (TS, p. 56); he explains to Mrs. Hammerbotham that among wildlife "Males have to talk to females, particularly in the spring when they are in love" (TS, p. 58); he tells the headman at the zoo that he is there "To defend freedom"

(TS, p. 175). Jennie, a first grader at Sam Beaver's school explains what a catastrophe is with the rambling diction of a six-year old:

When you get ready to go on a picnic with your father and mother and you make peanut butter sandwiches and jelly rolls and put them in a thermos box with bananas and an apple and some raisin cookies and paper napkins and some bottles of pop and a few hard-boiled eggs and then you put your thermos box in your car and just as you are starting out it starts to rain and your parents say there is no point in having a picnic in the rain, that's a catastrophe. (TS, p. 61)

Fern's diction, however, has the relative succinctness of an eight-year old; after a day at the fair, she tells her mother, "I had the best time I have ever had anywhere or anytime in all of my whole life" (CW, p. 143).

The ability to express oneself in writing is also important to White. He believes that "children often find pleasure and satisfaction in trying to set their thoughts down on paper, either in words or in pictures."¹¹ It is not surprising, then, that the main characters in all three of his children's books have some writing ability. Their written words complement their spoken words, further disclosing who they are to the reader.

The ability to write is important to the characters and important to the stories. Stuart not only uses writing as

a means of introducing himself to Harriet and inviting her to go canoeing, but he also gets so caught up "in the excitement of writing" he forgets he does not own a canoe (SL, p. 110). Sam Beaver ends each day with a journal entry that sometimes includes a drawing, usually comments on nature, and always closes with a question that he thinks about as he falls asleep. Louis masters the art of writing on his slate; he then writes messages, sends telegrams, and composes music. Through his writing, Louis is able to "speak"; this enables him to find work, to restore his father's good name, and ultimately to fulfill his own destiny. And Charlotte is, of course, a most skillful writer. Although she writes little--a total of only five words--she says much; choosing her words carefully, she is able to save Wilbur's life through the writings in her web.

Diction as it is used by White in his children's stories is a powerful method by which he creates and discloses the personalities of the characters. Each character is unique. Each possesses an ability to communicate that is relative to age, level of maturity, and environment. Through White's use of diction the reader encounters the diversity of language and life.

NOTES

¹William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White, The Elements of Style, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 68.

²Edward C. Sampson, E. B. White, Twayne United States Author Series, No. 232 (New York, Twayne, 1974), p. 23.

³"To Peter Vischer," 26 Apr. 1922, Letters of E. B. White, ed. Dorothy Lobrano Guth (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 39.

⁴James Thurber, "E. B. W.," Saturday Review of Literature, 15 Oct. 1938, p. 9.

⁵"To Mrs. N. J. Shopland," 28 Sept. 1961, Letters, p. 485.

⁶J. W. Fuller, Prose Styles in the Essays of E. B. White, Diss. Washington 1959 (Seattle: Univ. of Washington, 1959), p. 54.

⁷Thurber, p. 54.

⁸E. B. White, "Maine Speech," in One Man's Meat (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), p. 170.

⁹White, "Maine Speech," p. 170.

¹⁰E. B. White, "Some Remarks on Humor," in The Second Tree from the Corner (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), p. 180; Strunk and White, p. 71.

¹¹E. B. White, "Interview," in More Books by More People: Interviews with Sixty-Five Authors of Books for Children, ed. Lee Bennett Hopkins (New York: Citation Press, 1974), p. 378.

CHAPTER IV. DEFINITION

Definition, like description and diction, emerges as an important aspect of style in E. B. White's children's stories. White believes that books for children should contain words that challenge and stimulate the young reader. He rejects the tendency to write down to the reader, stating that:

Some writers for children deliberately avoid using words they think a child doesn't know. This emasculates the prose and, I suspect, bores the reader. Children are game for anything. I throw them hard words and they backhand them over the net. They love words that give them a hard time, provided they are in a context that absorbs their attention.¹

It is, then, the contexts within which words are introduced that White sees as crucial. In his own children's stories, he creates and employs several different contexts that facilitate the reader's understanding of challenging words.

One such context is the informal statement. Breaking within a paragraph, White simply takes the reader aside to fill him or her in on what needs to be known before going on with the story. He uses this device in The Trumpet of the Swan to casually provide an explicit definition for the unusual but essential term "cob":

A male swan, by the way, is called a "cob." No one knows why, but that's what he's called. A good many animals have special names; a male goose

is called a gander, a male cow is called a bull, a male sheep is called a ram, a male chicken is called a rooster, and so on. Anyway, the thing to remember is that a male swan is called a cob. (TS, p. 12)

White frequently uses the conversations between his characters as contexts within which he introduces and defines hard words. Through dialogue, one character explains the meaning of a word to another--and White explains the meaning of the word to the reader--without disrupting the flow of the story. White uses this technique in The Trumpet of the Swan, in the exchange between the Billings storekeeper and Alfred Gore:

"The Audubon Society is kind to birds. I want this money to be used to help birds. Some birds are in real trouble. They face extinction."

"What's extinction?" asked Alfred Gore. "Does it mean they stink?"

"Certainly not," said the storekeeper. "Extinction is what happens when you're extinct--when you don't exist anymore because there are no others like you. Like the passenger pigeon, and the eastern Heath hen and the Dodo and the dinosaur." (TS, p. 197)

In the same story, Abe "Lucky" Lucas chats with Louis about the zoo's practice of wing clipping:

Most of the birds that swim on this luxury lagoon have undergone surgery. Candor compels me to tell you that the tip of one wing is usually removed by the

management--a painless operation, popular with zoos the world over. 'Pinned' is the word for it, I believe. (TS, p. 145)

In Charlotte's Web, White also works definition into the dialogue. He introduces words within the context of Charlotte and Wilbur's relationship in which the spider gives the pig numerous vocabulary lessons. The first of these takes place during their initial conversation:

"Salutations!" said the voice.

Wilbur jumped to his feet. "Salu-
what?" he cried.

"Salutations!" repeated the voice.

"What are they and where are you?" screamed Wilbur. "Please, please, tell me where you are. And what are salutations?"

"Salutations are greetings," said the voice. "When I say 'salutations,' it's just my fancy way of saying hello or good morning." (CW, p. 35)

Throughout the story, Charlotte defines several other words for Wilbur: "untenable" (CW, p. 47), "sedentary" (CW, p. 61), "gullible" (CW, p. 67), "aeronaut" (CW, p. 103), and "versatile" (CW, p. 116). Even during their final conversation, she patiently instructs the pig:

"I don't feel good at all. I think I'm languishing, to tell you the truth."

Wilbur didn't understand the word "languish" and he hated to bother Charlotte

by asking her to explain. But he was so worried he felt he had to ask.

"What does 'languishing' mean?"

"It means I'm slowing up, feeling my age. I'm not young anymore, Wilbur."
(CW, p. 146)

White uses the conversational context in his two later books to explain words having more than one meaning. In one such dialogue the cob, with his usual flourish, clarifies the multiple meanings of the word "dumb" for Louis:

Louis tried to burble. He couldn't do it. No sound came.

"Well," said the cob, "I guess it's no use. I guess you are dumb."

When he heard the word "dumb," Louis felt like crying. The cob saw that he had hurt Louis's feelings.

"You misunderstand me, my son," he said in a comforting voice. "You failed to understand my use of the word 'dumb,' which has two meanings. If I had called you a dumb cluck or a dumb bunny that would have meant I had a poor opinion of your intelligence. Actually, I think you are perhaps the brightest, smartest, most intelligent of all my cygnets. Words sometimes have two meanings; the word 'dumb' is such a word. A person who can't see is called blind. A person who can't hear is called deaf. A person who can't speak is called dumb. That simply means he can't say anything." (TS, pp. 40-42)

Charlotte, in a similar though more succinct way, explains the meanings of the word "humble," taken from the final newspaper clipping Templeton delivers from the dump:

"It says 'humble,'" replied the rat.

"Humble?" said Charlotte. "'Humble' has two meanings. It means 'not proud' and it means 'near the ground.' That's Wilbur all over." (CW, p. 140)

Occasionally, White introduces vocabulary from non-English dialects in his books for children. He does so "on the theory that children enjoy new encounters" and believing that they experience "that first fine glow of maturity" when introduced to such language. However, he also maintains that in books for children, foreign words should be used sparingly.² White introduces a common foreign phrase in a conversation Wilbur and Charlotte have about her egg sac:

"What is that nifty little thing?
Did you make it?"

"I did indeed," replied Charlotte in a weak voice.

"Is it a plaything?"

"Plaything? I should say not. It is my egg sac, my magnum opus."

"I don't know what a magnum opus is," said Wilbur.

"That's Latin," explained Charlotte. "It means 'great work.'" (CW, pp. 144-145)

Mr. Brickley's explanation to one camper of why the camp is named Kookooskoos provides another example of White's use of foreign words:

"Mr. Brickle, why is this camp called Camp Kookooskoos? What does Kookooskoos mean?"

"It's an Indian name for the Great Horned Owl," replied Mr. Brickle.

"Then why didn't you just call it Camp Great Horned Owl instead of Camp Kookooskoos?"

"Because," replied Mr. Brickle, "a boys' camp should have a peculiar name; otherwise it doesn't sound interesting. Kookooskoos is a terrific name." (TS, p. 96)

In both of these instances, the contexts White creates for introducing foreign words promote the reader's interest and understanding.

While White explicitly defines many words for his juvenile readers, he also expects them to infer meanings for themselves. Believing that "Reading is the work of the alert mind," that children's minds are among the most alert, and that they have "the gift of solving things directly, easily, brilliantly," White sometimes introduces words in contexts that only suggest the words' meanings.³

White often embeds hard words in contexts laden with clues--other, more familiar words that help the reader discern meanings. When Stuart asks the Ames Crossing storekeeper if he can have a drink of sarsaparilla, the reader can infer the meaning of his outdated term based on the storekeeper's reply:

Certainly. Sarsaparilla, root beer, birch beer, ginger ale, Moxie, lemon soda, Coca Cola, Pepsi Cola, Dipsi Cola, Pipsi Cola, Popsi Cola, and raspberry cream tonic. Anything you want. (SL, p. 102)

This response, while not providing an explicit definition for sarsaparilla, conveys enough information that the reader can assume it is a type of carbonated soft drink that Stuart wants. Templeton, on the other hand, implies the meaning of several words when he reminds Wilbur: "I don't want to be stepped on, or kicked in the face, or pummeled, or crushed in any way, or squashed, or buffeted about, or bruised, or lacerated, or scarred, or biffed" (CW, p. 125). His familiar words, interspersed among the uncommon ones, form a context that gives implicit meaning to his response: he doesn't want to be hurt in any way.

White uses another type of inferential context, one in which he illustrates what words mean without actually defining them. The characters provide examples that give some sense of what the words signify. One example of this usage is provided when Louis tries to spell "catastrophe":

Louis picked up a fresh piece of chalk in his bill. He was scared. He took a good look at the word. "A long word is really no harder than a short one. I'll just copy one letter at a time, and pretty soon it will be finished. Besides, my life is a catastrophe. It's a catastrophe to be without a voice." Then he

began writing. CATASTROPHE, he wrote, making each letter neatly. (TS, pp. 62-63)

Louis's reference to his personal catastrophe gives the reader a feel for the word. Similarly, in his own classroom experience, Stuart illustrates the difference between what is advice and what is law while defining neither:

"Can anybody suggest any laws for the world?"

"Don't eat mushrooms, they might be toadstools," suggested Albert.

"That's not a law," said Stuart, "that's merely a bit of friendly advice. Very good advice, Albert, but advice and law are not the same. Law is much more solemn than advice. Law is extremely solemn. Anybody else think of a law for the world?"

"Nix on swiping anything," suggested Johnny Poldowski solemnly.

"Very good," said Stuart. "Good law." (SL, p. 93)

Many writers either talk down to the reader, or talk up to the reader. E. B. White talks to the reader. Throughout his books for children, White introduces words to juvenile readers in ways that both challenge them and help them discern meanings. White, who considers himself to be, primarily, a "word handler,"⁴ develops a number of implicit and explicit contexts that assist the young reader in the task of defining new or hard words. White develops these contexts

as part of the story itself, usually employing the dialogue of his characters. Consequently, his definitions enhance his prose rather than detract from it. Definition, then, as it is used by White in his children's books must be considered an essential aspect of his style.

NOTES

¹George A. Plimpton and Frank H. Crowther, "The Art of the Essay, I. E. B. White," Paris Review, 48 (Fall, 1969), 85. Part of this article is based on a conversation between White and the authors.

²E. B. White, "Letter," in The Pied Pipers: Interviews with the Influential Creators of Children's Literature, ed. Justin Wintle and Emma Fisher (New York: Paddington Press, 1974), p. 127. White sent a letter containing answers to interview questions to the editors; E. B. White, "Some Remarks on Humor," in The Second Tree from the Corner (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), p. 180; E. B. White, "Children's Books," in One Man's Meat (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), p. 23.

³E. B. White, "The Future of Reading," in Second Tree, p. 161; E. B. White, The Wild Flag (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946), p. 66.

⁴E. B. White, "Peaks of Journalism," in Second Tree, p. 159.

CHAPTER V. CONCLUSION

As stated in its introduction, this thesis is an examination of style in E. B. White's three books for children. Its purposes--to determine the key aspects of White's style in the books, to illustrate and compare examples of them from the books, and to discuss, with regard to those aspects considered, the significance of the books--are effected relative to a consideration of style in its broader sense.

Style, defined by White as that which is distinguished and distinguishing in the work of a writer is, in this sense, an essential quality of prose. While influenced by the principles of grammar, usage, and punctuation, it is not determined by them; rather, style is that which lends a particular flavor, fullness, and force to writing because it flows from the attitudes and ideas of the writer. White's attitudes about life, nature, language, and children are all reflected in his children's books through the specific aspects of his prose style.

Three aspects of White's style were discerned in his books for children and illustrated in this thesis: description, diction, and definition. Each of these aspects was shown to verify in a definite way White's beliefs about the goodness of life and the beauty of the natural world, the importance of language and the adeptness of children.

Description as it is employed by White integrates honest and authentic information with clear and detailed expression. Believing "If we feel beauty when we are young, there is great hope for us when we grow older,"¹ White uses this aspect of style to share his appreciation of life and the natural world with the reader. In his descriptions of characters, scenes, and happenings, White relies primarily on simple language, sometimes employing repetition, contrast, or cataloguing to emphasize detail.

Diction, defined as the spoken and written words of the characters, is the aspect of style through which White discloses the characters themselves to the reader. The diction of the characters illustrates their differences in age, personality, and background. Many of White's characters also possess the ability to write; their skills as writers play an important part in the stories.

Definition as an aspect of White's style introduces vocabulary in contexts that challenge the reader to discern or help the reader to understand the meaning of words. By using such contexts within the stories, White affirms his belief that children are eager, receptive, and quick, with great powers of observation and reasoning.²

The examination of White's style in the broader sense and the determination and illustration of the three key as-

pects of his style accomplished in this thesis provide a basis for ascertaining the significance of his books for children. Clearly, what is distinguished and distinguishing about these books as gleaned from the way White employs description, diction, and definition in the stories is not only White's use of language, but also his understanding of children and his respect for the juvenile reader.

In his essay on books for children, White comments:

I have heard it said that rats collect trinkets, that if you expose a rat's nest, you may find bits of glass and other small desirable objects. A child's mind is such a repository--full of gems of questionable merit, paste and real, held in storage.³

Through artful style in his own children's books, White adds only "shining jewels" to this "amazing collection."⁴

The business of reading and writing is important to E. B. White. Through his books, he communicates this belief to the reader. Perhaps, then, Stuart Little, Charlotte's Web, and The Trumpet of the Swan are most significant because children get a sense of the important business White is sharing with them; perhaps the books do, in fact, promote a "new awareness of the potential of children's books."⁵

NOTES

¹"To Some Sixth Graders in Los Angeles," 20 May 1973, Letters of E. B. White, ed. Dorothy Lobrano Guth (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 647.

²E. B. White, "Letter," in The Pied Pipers: Interviews with the Influential Creators of Children's Literature, ed. Justin Wintle and Emma Fisher (New York: Paddington Press, 1974), p. 126. White sent a letter containing answers to interview questions to the editors.

³E. B. White, "Children's Books," in One Man's Meat (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), p. 24.

⁴White, "Children's Books," p. 24.

⁵Ursula Nordstrom, "Stuart, Wilbur, Charlotte: A Tale of Tales," New York Times Book Review, 12 May 1974, p. 8. Nordstrom was head of Harper Junior Books during the years White published his three books for children.

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